



DePaul Magazine

Volume 1
Issue 412025 *Summer 2019*

Article 8

6-17-2019

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Recommended Citation

(2019) "Solving the Creativity Puzzle," *DePaul Magazine*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 412025 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/depaul-magazine/vol1/iss412025/8>

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Solving the Creativity Puzzle

DePaul's College of Education is exporting its innovative teacher training methods to China.

By Abigail Pickus

It all started with a simple request from Chicago's Rush University.

"They have these incredible faculty in their medical school, but they had never been trained in the skills and practices of teaching," recalls Donna Kiel, an instructional assistant professor in the teacher education program in DePaul's College of Education (COE).

So Kiel created and facilitated a six-week intensive training program for a group of medical faculty. "This customized professional learning really transformed how they view teaching and how they teach," says Kiel.

The experience prompted James Wolfinger, associate dean for curriculum and programs, and **Roxanne Owens (EDU '84)**, associate professor and teacher education program chair, to ask Kiel to investigate whether other educational organizations might be interested in this type of customized professional development.



OIPL Director Donna Kiel leading professional development training for Chinese educators

She started researching. Before coming to DePaul, Kiel had applied her entrepreneurial leadership for nearly 30 years in secondary education, and she had nurtured partnerships with several companies to develop technology initiatives at the schools where she served as principal. She called her industry contacts and asked, “Is there a need for this?”

The answer was a resounding “yes.” Kiel learned through a colleague in Beijing, China, that an educational research company was interested in her work. She presented her findings to Dean Paul Zions, Wolfinger and Owens, thinking she had done her duty and could go back to teaching.

Instead, with the provost’s stamp of approval, in 2013 COE officially launched the Office of Innovative Professional Learning (OIPL), with Kiel as its director. This innovative model of educational professional development offers customized training programs for educational institutions, businesses and other organizations. In addition to Rush, which has become a regular client, OIPL has developed and run trainings for public and parochial schools throughout Chicago, private companies and even the Library of Congress.

But one of OIPL’s greatest impacts has been in the People’s Republic of China.

Conformity Meets Creativity

Since 2013, OIPL has partnered with educational organizations working on behalf of China’s K-12 schools to offer customized professional development to teachers. In that capacity, OIPL has sent DePaul faculty to Beijing and its surrounding provinces to lead professional development courses for nearly 900 teachers from more than 47 schools.

“Our partnership with China continues to grow at a rapid pace. This past summer, with

four different trips, we provided professional development to more than 300 teachers,” says Kiel.

Their directive is specific: Bring creativity to the Chinese classroom.

“China is outstanding at direct instruction and in preparing students for tests, but they came to us because they want to learn creativity and innovation,” says Kiel. “Innovative ideas are born from creativity, and COE faculty are experts at engaging students in such creative thinking.”

One major challenge of this endeavor is that Chinese culture is built upon a very traditional teaching model, with teachers delivering lectures in front of the class and stu-

dents memorizing facts. This approach works for an educational system built to prepare students to pass the rigorous Gaokao tests, the two-day entrance examination required by nearly every institution of higher learning in China.

There is also another built-in challenge: a culture of conformity instilled by Mao’s Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. “Creativity really emerges when you can identify the self as different from others, which is starkly different from China’s message that we all think the same,” says Kiel.

Nonetheless, there is an element of individuality in Chinese culture upon which to build a more creative society.

I think our professional development is different than many universities’ because it’s very customized to the culture itself. —Donna Kiel



Associate Professor Roxanne Owens leading a workshop in Beijing on designing and implementing lessons that are interactive and engaging



“When you look at Buddhism or at the ancient text Tao Te Ching, both say that you’re uniquely you and there’s no one else like you. I believe strongly that creativity can be taught because it’s about going inward and identifying the self. Once you find your life purpose and you align it with a value, then what you do is different from what I do. This leads you on a path of creativity,” says Kiel.

Can Creativity Be Taught?

Roxanne Owens has traveled to China several times for OIPL.

“Each time I did basically the same thing, which was trying to show the teachers alternatives to the ‘stand and deliver’ model of getting information across to students,” she says.

One popular lesson she modeled was designed to convey information about the Titanic. “One of the first things that we did was called ‘each one teach one,’ where everybody gets a fact about the Titanic and then you have to walk around the room and teach your fact to everybody else. Then we did something called the jigsaw, where your group gets one piece of information about the Titanic, and then you take your piece of the information and spread out to different groups to ultimately piece together a whole picture of the Titanic,” says Owens.

The end result was a room full of Chinese educators who were not only learning new things but also enjoying the process.

“It’s interesting because when we would ask them about their most powerful learning experiences they would always say, ‘It was when I was really engaged in learning, when I got to do a case study, or when I got to walk around the room and do a think-pair-share [a collaborative learning strategy],’” says Owens.

Creativity Catch-22

The problem Owens encountered was that the teachers did not always bring these engaging, student-centered approaches back to their own classrooms.

“When we followed up with them to see if they used these strategies in their own classrooms, the answer was always the same; ‘No, we don’t have time’ or ‘That’s not what we’re evaluated on. We’re evaluated on their test scores,’” says Owens with a sigh.

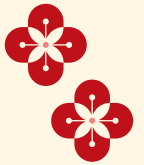
This Catch-22 played out often, with the educators being inspired by what they had experienced but stymied once they got back to their own classrooms.

“We would talk to the administrators to let them know that they were putting the teachers in a bad position because what you’re evaluating them on is not matching what you’re asking them to do in the classroom. The administrators would always tell us how committed they are to their teachers’ engaging the students more. Then we would go back to the teachers and tell them that by using more engaging strategies, the kids will learn more and will think at higher levels,” says Owens.

But each time, they hit this proverbial wall. “It’s an uphill battle, kind of a chicken-and-egg debate,” says Owens. “Which comes first, getting the teachers to teach this way or



Educators from China and OIPL Director Donna Kiel during a visit to DePaul for teacher training



getting the administrators to allow them to or getting the tests to not dominate the whole approach? In China, these tests are high stakes. Your future depends on whether you're going to get into this college or that college, so it's hard to convince people to not just stand and give the answers."

But the DePaul faculty do see steady progress.

"One of the things that we saw was that when we were able to engage educators with something that was a part of their culture, they often felt more comfortable doing something that was more creative and open-ended," says Wolfinger, who taught with Owens on several trips.

For Chelsea Qu, vice president of Mindexplorer Education Association, LLC, the Chinese company that has engaged OIPL to teach multiple training sessions, the lessons are making a difference.

"The DePaul teacher training is very different from other trainings," she shares via email. "DePaul professors always engage the teachers. The teachers change the way they think about teaching and see the importance of student-centered learning and creativity after the DePaul sessions."

The teachers change the way they think about teaching and see the importance of student-centered learning and creativity after the DePaul sessions. —Chelsea Qu



OIPL Director Donna Kiel leading a training for teachers from China on student-centered teaching and cultivating creativity

Amazing Similarities

Before they go to China, DePaul steeps OIPL faculty in Chinese culture, religion and educational philosophy.

"I think our professional development is different than many universities' because it's very customized to the culture itself. We don't presume that we, as Americans, know about creativity in your culture. Instead, we use a multicultural lens to deeply understand Chinese culture so that we can honor that system and also tell you what's possible," says Kiel.

For Owens, that means letting Chinese educators know that "we're here to learn together. I'm very interested in building on what they do well. We never approach it like what they do is not right," she says.

It turns out there are many parallels between the educational experiences on both sides of the Pacific.

"They have a lot of the very same challenges we do. It's interesting how you could be halfway around the world and have the same kinds of student/parent/administration issues. The similarities are amazing," says Owens.

And the 21st-century challenges facing both countries are also the same.

"How is it that we try to inculcate in people a sense of creativity, innovation and problem-solving?" asks Wolfinger. "Because the 21st-century economy is going to need people who are really smart and educated in how to identify problems and then come together as a team to creatively solve them."